

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

Published from the Workshop of Willard E. Hawkins,
1835 Champa Street, Denver, Colorado.

Volume V Number 10

October, 1920

50c a Year, 3 Years \$1

MOVEMENT VERSUS ACTION

MOVEMENT and action in fictional composition are frequently regarded as synonymous. Analysis, however, may be adduced to show that they are separate and distinct attributes.

Movement we may define as the *progression* of incidents in a story toward the climax. The action consists of the incidents themselves.

To make clear that at least there may be a distinction between the two, let us consider the analogy of an automobile. Its progress toward a destination corresponds in a sense to story movement. The working of the motor, gears, wheels, ignition system, and other parts corresponds to story action. We may have action without movement or progression, as when the motor races while the car is stationary. We may also have movement without action, as it were. Suppose that the automobile should fall over a cliff with the motor idle!

Let us take an illustrative bit of fiction and see whether the two elements can be dissociated, closely intertwined as they necessarily must be.

In the April issue of *The Student-Writer* was evolved an illustrative plot outline which may serve as an example. For convenience it will be briefly repeated here.

The hero of the story drives up to a country home in a handsome roadster and does a seemingly inexplicable thing in wrecking his car against one of the gateposts. Apparently unconscious after the crash, he is carried inside.

It develops that he is a former sweetheart of the girl who lives in the country home. They have quarreled and vowed never to speak to each other again. Repenting of his vow, the young man deliberately wrecked his car in order that his presence in the girl's home might be brought about by supposedly accidental means. Further, he feigns amnesia, and begins to woo the girl all over again under pretense of having forgotten their former relationship.

The situation is complicated when detectives connect the hero

Entered as second-class matter April 21, 1916, at the post office at Denver, Colo.
Single copies 5 cents. Foreign subscriptions 75 cents; 3 years \$1.50.

with a bank robbery that occurred on the night of his pretended accident. The loot has been discovered in the hero's wrecked car, where it was hidden by the robbers, close pressed by officers who gave chase along the road. This makes matters bad for the hero, since he cannot defend himself without acknowledging that he has been feigning amnesia.

A detective catches him in an act that betrays his imposture. The net thus closes about him, and the situation reaches a climax in his arrest.

At this point the girl, hitherto seemingly indifferent to him, rises to his defense, tells who he is, and acknowledges her love for him. This unseals the hero's tongue, and he is able to give the officers convincing proof that he had no connection with the robbery.

Now, first, let us review the *action* of this story. It is divisible roughly into incidents as follows:

1. Hero drives up to the gate and wrecks his car.
2. He is carried into the home of the heroine.
3. Without revealing that he recognizes the girl as his former sweetheart, hero attempts to win her love over again.
4. She proves adamant against his wooing.
5. Hero finds himself under suspicion as a bank robber.
6. He inadvertently reveals to a detective that he is merely feigning amnesia.
7. His arrest as a bank robber naturally results.
8. The girl rises to his defense, admitting her love for him.
9. Hero's tongue is unsealed. He admits his deception and proves an alibi.

So much for the incidents—the changes involving the characters and “properties” peculiar to this particular story. Now let us see whether the *movement* may not be independently indicated. Bear in mind that movement involves the progression of the incidents, rather than the incidents themselves.

Incidents 1 and 2 carry the story forward to the extent of creating a situation and laying the groundwork for future developments.

Incident 3 prepares for a crisis.

Incident 4 constitutes a crisis.

Incident 5 introduces a complication.

Incident 6 prepares for the second crisis.

Incident 7 constitutes the second crisis and prepares for the climax.

Incident 8 constitutes the climax.

Incident 9 resolves the conflicting elements of the climax to harmony and brings the story to a close.

This progression may be even more concisely summarized, as follows:

(1) Creation of situation, (2) preparation for crisis, (3) crisis, (4) complication, (5) preparation for second crisis, (6) second crisis, forming preparation for climax, (7) climax, (8) resolution of all complications to harmony.

It thus appears that the movement of a story may be reduced to an abstraction, while the action is specific. This same movement might prove to be identical in whole or in part with the movement of another story, which, of course, would not be true of the action.

That we cannot have movement without action is probably true; but it would be comparatively easy to have action without movement. For example:

1. Wild Bill, the terror of the plains, drives into town and frightens the inhabitants.

2. Wild Bill dashes from town to the hills and holds up a stagecoach.

3. Wild Bill goes to another town and kidnaps the "school-ma'am," carrying her off to his mountain cabin.

Here we have a series of events. Undoubtedly they constitute action, but it is difficult to discover in them any evidence of story movement. A situation is created in incident 1, but incident 2 does not carry the story beyond the creation of that situation, and incident 3 likewise keeps things at a standstill. A dozen or more incidents of the same type, each centering about a new atrocity on the part of Wild Bill, could be strung along in a row without moving the story forward.

But suppose we plan our action with a purpose—that of creating movement. With this in view, we evolve another incident, as follows:

4. Citizens of the terrorized region, indignant at Wild Bill's depredations, form a posse to pursue him and wreak vengeance upon him.

Here we begin to make progress. The story has ceased to stand still. The first three incidents did nothing more than to create a situation—any one of them alone would have served that purpose. The fourth goes a step beyond this situation.

Digressing, briefly, from the main line of reasoning which we have been following, it might be objected that this drawing of distinctions between action and movement is a hair-splitting exercise of academic rather than practical value. On the contrary, it can be shown that if the writer is equipped with a conception of proper

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story movement he will be unlikely to make mistakes in the selection of material.

For example—returning to the harrowing tale of Wild Bill, the terror of the plains—it was realization of the necessity for movement that led us to climb out of the rut of repeating a certain form of incident and to inject new elements into the development of the tale. If at a loss what kind of incident to create next, we have only to recall what we know about story movement. Thus far we have (1) a situation and (2) the preparation for a crisis. The next step after preparation for a crisis would naturally lead to the crisis itself. Very well. The crisis is evolved by bringing together Wild Bill and the sheriff's posse.

We accomplish this—no doubt with much bloodshed and noise of conflict—and again our story seems to falter. Our knowledge of story movement once more comes to the rescue. A complication must be introduced. The complication might be this: Wild Bill, driven into a corner and hard pressed by his pursuers, holds the kidnaped schoolteacher in front of him and stands off the posse. He can shoot any of its members, while they are afraid to fire upon him for fear of hitting the woman.

This incident developed, it will be time to prepare for another crisis—and so on.

The same general movement is followed in the majority of fictional works. That is, the incidents are so arranged that they bring about first a situation, then the preparation for a crisis, then the crisis, then a complication, preparation for a new crisis, and so on, until finally a climax is reached. Any amount of action may fail to carry the story forward unless it follows a progressive plan such as this.

Is it possible to have movement without action?

Not quite, although it is possible to have movement without physical action. And physical action is what the editor usually

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means when he speaks of action. If he criticises a story as "lacking in action," he means that there is not enough actual going to and fro, clashing, straining of muscles, or the like, on the part of characters.

Action, however, in a strict sense, may be confined to the mental realm. We might conceive, for example, of a completely rounded piece of fiction developed solely through a dialogue between two characters. Seated quietly together on a park bench from first to last, their conversation might bring about in one or both successive changes of mental attitude that clearly would amount to movement and progression. The characters might be a man and a girl. At the beginning the girl might be indifferent toward the man. He would say things that would arouse her active repulsion toward him, and then, continuing further, would present those things in such a light that her repulsion would be changed into pity, sympathy, admiration, and finally, love. Here certainly will have been progression and movement, the outcome of mental action.

In all probability an editor would reject such a story as containing no action. This, because action is loosely regarded as existing only when it is apparent to the eye.

If intelligently employed, action that is even more strictly mental than that outlined in the above illustration might furnish movement to a story. One character, indeed, immersed in thought, might provide the material for clearly defined story movement.

He could be introduced, for example, in a mood of deep dejection. His thoughts would so increase this dejection that he would seriously contemplate suicide. On the point of forming a determination to kill himself, he would recall a former crisis in his life when he was similarly discouraged. On that occasion, he would recollect, an unforeseen circumstance stayed his hand and he was afterward glad that he had lived. Question: Might not such a contingency again occur? Reviewing the situation that caused his gloom, he would realize that it was not as hopeless as he had at first supposed. And so, by logical degrees, he would arrive at a hopeful and cheerful state of mind.

Certainly, in such a development there is progression, even

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though it be limited to a chain of thought. Memory, Irresolution, Determination, Reason, and their companion attributes would constitute the actors and furnish the action. But movement is dependent upon this action following an orderly course. There is no movement, for instance, so long as the thinker dwells merely upon his discouragement. Movement results only when a new factor is introduced or old factors are combined to produce a new situation.

A story without action of the physical type may be effective if skilfully handled, but the popular demand is for physical or, as it were, objectively visualized action. For the writer who would satisfy present-day markets it is a good plan to bear in mind the requirements of the stage or the screen and to "check up" on the action by making sure that there is enough of the physical to lend variety and furnish occupation for the eye, supposing that the story were produced in such form.

But however lacking in physical action we may permit our

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stories to be, it should be kept in mind that a story without movement, no matter how full of action, is hopeless.

A good rule to follow is that of employing just as little action as possible to bring about each successive stage of the movement. In the Wild Bill illustration three separate incidents were employed merely to evolve an opening situation. The same situation would have resulted from the employment of only one of the incidents. This story would be rich in action but slow in movement. Readers would become impatient for the story to take a new turn before they were through reading the first three incidents.

If a story can be moved forward by a single bit of action, by all means let that single bit of action suffice. It is, however, conceivable that in certain cases a great deal of action would be necessary to create a situation or to prepare for some crisis. Nothing but experience and good judgment can determine this for the writer in particular instances.

W. E. H.

MORE CRITICAL FRAGMENTS

Fragment 18.

NOT to discourage amateur scenario writers, but to give them an idea of the difficulties that lie in their paths, the following statement is quoted from Street & Smith's "Guidebook for Scenario Writers," the figures having been originally compiled by the 1919 year book of Camera. It indicates that the scenario writer, in trying to sell his wares, must submit ideas better than thousands of others are submitting—or ideas, at any rate, that will appeal to the producers as better. No doubt the bulk of rejected scenarios are mediocre, so that the writer who really has exceptional qualifications as a screen writer will stand out a bit from the crowd.

According to this report, during 1918, the American Film Company purchased 15 scenarios and rejected 3,072. The Brunton studio, buying for Bessie Barriscale and Louise Glaum rejected 2,459 and arranged for the purchase of 100. The Chaplin studio rejected 3,500 and purchased one. The Christie studio read 5,000 stories, bought 110 and produced 104. The Fairbanks studio purchased six stories out of 1,171 submitted. M. M. Stearns of the Dorothy Gish company states that 99 per cent of the scenarios submitted were rejected and that of the remaining one per cent four were purchased and several are now being held on an option, awaiting the star's decision whether or not to purchase. D. W. Griffith bought 15 stories during the year. He rejected in the neighborhood of 9,000. William S. Hart reports the purchase of eight stories out of a submitted 3,000. The National Studios purchased 12 stories out of 1,872 submitted. Mary Pickford bought one submitted scenario and has been rejecting an average of five a day.

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